CHAPTER SIX

Possibilities

I SETTLED BACK IN THE BIG GREEN CHAIR AND READ THE TRANSCRIBED words of students and teachers. I read my own words in journals and old transcripts. I looked at data sheets and columns of numbers. Then I asked myself a question that surprised me, that was deceptively simple: What do I want to happen as a result of my conferencing?

I realized that I had hoped when I began to research conferencing that I would find real change was taking place, that I would learn how to conference with more skill and compassion. That I would learn how to challenge—even in small ways—the same structures that made me feel so inadequate as a student, that kept me convinced for so long that failure and success was always and completely an individual matter, that made me feel—even briefly—ashamed of my family, myself, and my knowledge. I lost that hope initially, momentarily overwhelmed by the repetitive control, conference after conference, that helps socialize students (and reaffirm teachers) into patterns that make possible the kind of anger and humiliation I described in the introduction. But over the course of this work, I recast the questions I began with. Where I had started by asking "What's going on in conferencing?" I ended up asking, "What *could* happen in conferencing?"

What could happen between a teacher and a student that would move us toward a better world? I thought again of bell hooks's goal to educate for freedom. I went from "realist" to "idealist" because for me, that is the only movement that makes sense. And, where I once saw a conference as a clearly bounded event, a static "thing" much like a box which contains other, more active things, I now see conferences as dynamic and permeable, interwoven—sometimes closely, sometimes distantly—with many other aspects of our lives. I

began to ask myself questions that I could answer, should answer: Why do I conference? Are conferences an extension of my classroom practice? Are they a repair for what goes on in my classroom? Are they a repair for what I see going on outside my classroom? What do I challenge? What do I affirm? Do my students know what I am doing in and with my conferences? What do my students think about all this stuff?

The questions I consider in this final chapter are concerned with practice and ideology, goals and people. I feel powerful enough to believe that I can make something happen; I recognize my privileged position and need to understand more clearly how I intend to use that position. I need to consider not just how the students sitting in the classroom will be affected by what I do and will themselves affect me, but how these conferences that slide by one after another support or challenge or change a much larger system of power, access, and learning. Over the course of this chapter, I will examine the connection between critical discourse analysis and critical pedagogy and consider how the goals of critical pedagogy might lead us toward "third-generation" conferencing. Student descriptions of conferencing help me bridge the gap between what we hope for and what seems to happen. I will include some suggestions for conferencing that grow out of consideration of the research conferences, my own conferencing, and the goals of a critical classroom. It was my own sense of frustration and failure in conferencing that prompted me to begin this research, and I want to end it—temporarily at least—with the kinds of questions and possibilities that I see for my future conferencing practice. It's like any fishing story—there's always hope, there's always another chance.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Pedagogy

In *Life in Schools* (1989), Peter McLaren provides us with a look at the devastating ways in which social class, education, and gender are all intertwined in an urban school. He argues that

> We claim to live in a meritocracy where social salvation is supposedly achieved through scholastic merit: every student will, more or less, reap the academic awards of his or her own initiative, regardless of sex, religion, or family background. That all sounds fine on the surface, but in reality it's simply hollow rhetoric . . . I believe . . . it's the latent function of

> the educational system to maintain the status quo, including existing social inequities. (151)

He asks us to be reflective teachers, to examine our own practices and ask questions about the ways in which knowledge is constructed in our classrooms. We should consider, for example, the kinds of speech we value, the kinds of experience we privilege, and the ways in which our students not only resist being drawn into the dominant ideology of our culture but the ways in which we resist being drawn into *their* lives, experiences, and language. McLaren comes to realize that he has not been appreciating all that his impoverished students bring to the classroom. Rather, he has been pitying them, and in his liberal pity, he has attempted to instill in them his middle-class white values, assuming without question that these values are "better." He has attempted to reproduce himself and the system he now sees has helped construct the situation which limits these children's access to learning and controls their lives.

I keep returning to the classroom—I must, for it is really where conferences begin. If we want students to be active learners and teachers in conferences, they must also occupy such roles in the classroom. Ideally, a conference should be an extension of the classroom. By that I mean that conferences shouldn't be scheduled because a teacher must repair the dynamics of the classroom, nor does it make sense to see learning as discrete, bounded events—the result of this lesson plan and that conference. Just as a teacher considers goals (her own and her students) for the class and how they will be worked toward or achieved, she needs as well to consider the role that conferencing will play in achieving those goals. For teachers practicing critical pedagogy, McLaren outlines connections between knowledge and power and how they might be considered in the classroom.

> Knowledge is relevant only when it begins with the experiences students bring with them from the surrounding culture; it is critical only when those experiences are shown to sometimes be problematic (i.e. racist, sexist); and it is transformative only when students begin to use the knowledge to help empower others. Knowledge then becomes linked to social reform. (189-190)

Conferencing has been posited by a large number of compositionists as a way to enter our students' lives, to get to know them better, to

listen to them speak (or to allow them to speak) outside the rigid framework of most classrooms. (Note the assumption that classroom structure cannot be fundamentally changed, only offset by outside activities.) It was to be a way to validate student experiences and language, a meeting place where teachers and students could be "just people," could be identified less by their institutional roles and more by their beliefs and experiences. The need to learn about our students acknowledges the increasing diversity of classrooms and the gap between the middle-class values of teachers and the values of their students. However, the effort to get to know our students is not entirely innocent. It is usually the means to an end—to find effective ways to bring them into the fold. In the context of the classroom as a neutral site where "facts" and common-sense knowledge about what is right and good are dispensed (and although this notion has taken a beating in academe, I would argue that it is a belief still widely held outside the academy), conferencing is presented as humane, compassionate, a personalized way to help those who have not seen the rightness or understood the facts. Even in liberal classrooms, where difference may not be ignored or repressed but is "celebrated" in thematic units on diversity, conferences still function to find ways to subordinate the personal experience and language of students to a dominant world view—the teacher's. Many of the teachers who taped their conferences with me consider themselves to be feminists, Marxists, people of strong social conscience sharing the common goal of changing what they see as systemic inequality in our culture. In their curricula, they introduce students to materials that critique the educational system, the class system, and the race and gender constructions that permeate our culture. I admire and respect their beliefs. But there is a disturbing disjunction between their goals and their practice.

Bell hooks argues that many teachers are unable to critically consider their pedagogy because they are afraid; they have so identified themselves as a teacher that they cannot question that identity. As teachers (and students), we have become used to the difference in power, in status, that our institutional positions offer us. Some of us, privileged by our race or class and surrounded by others of the same race or class and values, have become used to that particular kind of power as well. This is why for so many teachers, students, and parents, a shift to critical pedaogogy—the sharing of power, the shifting of some responsibilities, the change in speech and learning patterns,

the suddenly released voices of those we have silenced—feels "wrong," is difficult for us, sometimes in ways we cannot clearly articulate. We are not used to this sudden "conversation" in the classroom. Others are afraid to change their practice because students often resist empowering pedagogies—they have been conditioned to believe that the teacher has all the answers and will give them to students. And when they resist pedagogy they resist teachers. "I found that there was much more tension in the diverse classroom setting where the philosophy of teaching is rooted in critical pedagogy and (in my case) feminist critical pedagogy. The presence of tension—and at times even conflict—often meant that my students did not enjoy my classes or love me, their professor, as I secretly wanted them to do" (hooks, 41-42). And when teachers are faced with poor evaluations, they use whatever practice has served them better; the economics of their job and the institution force them back into old patterns. In a dialog, Ron Scapp and bell hooks point out that teachers will often change their curriculum and include new texts, but will not alter their pedagogy substantially. They can control those texts, present them and the messages they could potentially send exactly as they have presented canonical texts. But as hooks puts it, "Education as the practice of freedom is not just about liberatory knowledge, it's about liberatory practice" (147).

What happens in many classrooms, then, is a kind of surface respect, a civil distance and a friendly control. Henry Giroux (1988) describes the "pedagogy of cordial relations" as a particularly insidious form of teaching.

> Defined as the "other," students now become objects of inquiry in the interest of being understood so as to be more easily controlled. The knowledge, for example, used by teachers with these students is often drawn from cultural forms identified by class, race, and gender specific interests. But relevance, in this instance, has little to do with emancipatory concerns; instead, it translates into pedagogical practices that attempt to appropriate forms of student and popular culture in the interests of maintaining social control. (127)

When I read this description, I asked myself: "Why do I ask my students to tell me about themselves? What kinds of information do I want to know? Toward what end will I use that information? What do I tell them in return? What don't I tell them? How is my asking for this information—a teacher asking a student—different from me

asking a colleague? How does power work in this situation?" I had no answer I was proud of.

Critical discourse analysis is in many ways a counterpart to critical pedagogy. Peter McLaren argues that critical pedagogues are "united in their objectives: to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequities and injustices" (160). Like critical discourse analysts, critical educators are not merely interested in describing the ways in which power and knowledge are welded—and wielded—but are crucially concerned with examining abuse of power, the ethics of knowledge and teaching, and the effects upon human beings. It is to teach and analyze from a position that is at once profoundly theoretical and profoundly personal. If the kinds of critical discourse analysis that has informed the research in this book is capable of interrogating the contexts of language and the construction of knowledge and power with a goal of transforming systemic inequality, then critical pedagogy appears to be the approach most likely to achieve that goal. The analysis of language, of the transcripts we've read here, is part of that reflective and critical practice that McLaren and others call for.

Conferencing offers enormous potential for reproducing individually the inequities of the classroom and culture. Students have told me repeatedly that one reason conferences are so meaningful is that it's only in a conference that a student hears what's really important. They've explained that in a classroom, the teacher has to talk to everybody, has to "water down" information because it's spread across a wide range of skills and backgrounds. They assert that in a conference, however, you find out "what really counts." One student wrote to me that "if a teacher says something important in class, she really could mean it's important to the guy across the room. But if you hear it in a conference, then you know it's important, because it's directed to you."

What this student is saying, in one way, is that education that counts (counts toward what?!) is not generally occurring in the classroom, where differences between students are not acknowledged and the discourse is one of homogeneity. What the conferences I've studied show, however, is that the "personalization" of conferences consists largely of overtly dealing with the ways in which each individual student has not met expectations of punctuation, support, organization, and adherence to a correct point of view, and unconsciously affirming or addressing breaches of socially constructed roles: student-teacher, male-female. Thus Erin openly instructs Jeff on how

deep-thinking students would approach a particular issue; she also instructs him—by insisting on her right to speak—that the teacher-student relationship overrides the conventional female-male dynamic from which Jeff operates. Likewise, Cari is affirmed in her observation of traditional female-male, student-teacher relationships, receiving praise and information as a result of her conventional performance. Giroux argues that "language is inseparable from lived experience" (116). We see Cari drawing on her experiences as a female and a student, reenacting that experience again in her pattern of discourse. We see teachers, experienced in power, using language powerfully to recreate that power constantly.

Critical reflection means asking ourselves as teachers questions about what seems to be ordinary and natural. Although the instructors in these conferences ask their students why they chose a particular syntactic construction or why they believe a particular reading of a text is right, they do not ask themselves the same questions. Even as Eric is critiquing rules about the use of *and*, he is replacing them with another rule. Even as he is explaining the value of working from our own experience of the text, he is demanding that Dana see her paper as an argument. (Are all our experiences arguments?) Proof rests on redundancy, he insists, and yet the proof of our lives rests on various and singular experiences, as well as redundancy. He argues that the papers we write are not fictions. And yet, I can remember papers I've written that *were* fictions, that were constructions of "truth" given to me by a teacher, unexplained and unjustified, disconnected from my own experience of the text. If I didn't give him back his "truth" in my paper, I would fail. His truth was my fiction. So I wrote fiction.

The authoritative discourse of the instructors in these conferences leaves little space for student voices or stories, even halting, tentative, brief ones. John, for example, attempts to tell the story of his own unsuccessful experiences with peer critiques, and Nina responds by asserting that she already knows what John knows. By doing so, she has closed up the little space John had created for teaching *her*. John also calls into question one of the fundamental assumptions of most writing teachers—that they can improve students' writing through their commentary on it. John argues that he does everything that Nina suggests he do and still, the paper doesn't turn out as he wishes it to. Actually, his complaint may be double-edged. Perhaps he wishes the paper to turn out as Nina does, in which case, Nina's comments are not helpful in achieving that goal.

Or perhaps he is emphasizing the difference between what he thinks is good and what Nina does. Nina's response is a defense of her practice, her ability to provide helpful comments; she suggests that John is unrealistic in expecting good writing to happen quickly (although in many ways our usual commentary suggests that improvement *will* be significant and swift).

What Nina has done in these two instances is to silence John's complaints and questions, an act that is repeated again and again in these conferences. Rather than opening up the space to create a dialogue where teacher and student can interrogate each other's beliefs and practices, a space which provides the distance needed for critical reflection, the authority of the teacher is invoked and acted on without question by the teacher, though with some resistance from students. And sometimes students desire that authority when we would rather not comply. We need critical reflection just as much at such times.

When teachers do leave open those spaces tentatively created by students, then the traditional hierarchies of knowledge and power shift. In chapter one, I provided part of a transcript from Mary and Rick's conference, during which Rick told an extended story about his grandfather's death. For some period of time, Mary ignores opportunities to shift the talk back to a teaching register. Instead, she helps to support its construction, asking him to clarify details now and then. For more than one hundred lines, Rick controls the talk of the conference, occupying a powerful position not ordinarily available to students. Giroux notes that school is a site where stories can be told and where personal and historical connections can be made as students explore their experiences in a new web of social relationships; stories beget stories, invite comparison and analysis. Extended narratives like Rick's are uncommon; the teachers on these tapes are reluctant to acquiesce to the demands of storytelling. But even short narratives can briefly shift power relations. Remember Dana's story about her difficulty in her literature class? Eric eventually takes back the floor, but Dana forces Eric to listen to her, even for a short period of time. Jeff, too, attempts to tell the story about how he wrote the draft Erin is responding to. But he places his story at the very beginning of the conference, and since there is no context to help Erin make sense of it, she interrupts to take control and read the new draft on her own terms. Stories, apparently, must be well-placed to provide students the opportunity to speak at length. But

when they are, they provide a significant challenge to the control usually exercised by instructors.

Stories by teachers can be crucial as well. Michele Grijalva began to transform the resistance she encountered with her native American students by telling a story about her own experiences as a child in a native American culture. Victor Villanueva speaks openly about his continuing struggle with writing, the ways in which his home language and ways of thinking clash with the conventions of academic discourse. "I speak of such things in the courses I teach not only for the sake of those from Latino backgrounds, but for all. There can be no telling of the linguistic backgrounds of the students" (88). In my classes, I speak of my own frustrations in college, of the struggle to speak and write in acceptable ways, and I speak with love and joy about my family and the ways we speak with one another.

Through our stories, through our power, we must be "facilitators" (hooks, 156). In almost every conference I've ever listened to, the relationship between the participants is set at the very beginning by the teacher. Typically, the instructor will ask the student what he or she had brought that day, as if the student is bringing gifts to a royal personage. Or the instructor will "allow" the student to set the agenda, asking what the student wants to talk about, what questions they have about the text. In those instances, the questions become the gift, allowing the teacher to talk from that point onward, usually dealing with the student's question quickly and moving on to the teacher's agenda. I know these patterns very well because they are the two I have consistently used in past conferences. In the classroom and in the conference, we must use our power to "authorize" speech to forward student goals, to teach for critical knowledge. That means that any agenda we set must be flexible, for as parties learn they change their minds, their goals, their beliefs and values.

In chapter one, I outlined the differences between conversation and teacher-talk; they are significant particularly in terms of control and negotiation of meaning. In conversation, topics are developed and supported mutually. Speakers self-select, and shape in negotiated. That kind of structure is even more rare in these conferences than narratives—I find it only between Don and Lyn.

In the first half of the conference, Don is in control, and the conference moves roughly along. The excerpt below begins when Lyn shifts the conference to a conversation about the current class text, *A Clockwork Orange*, catching Don by surprise.

Don: But I think uh aside from that I think that you know the ideas you've got n that you you've argued in that papers are good, n I think know. (2 sec) Generally you make a lot of sense I mean in arguing for Alex's uh (4 sec) Alex's.. necessity of choice.

Lyn: (6 sec) That was a pretty good book.

Don: Huh?

Lyn: It was a pretty good book.

Don: (3 sec) Yeah. Dya like the book or the movie better.

Lyn: (2 sec) See I dunno they both had their strengths I think um (4 sec) I dunn actually it'd probably be a toss-up. I don't mind either way. (2 sec) There's parts that were in the book that weren't in the movie an..there's visualizations in the movie that you didn't see in the book.]

Don: [Basil the snake isn't in the book.]

Lyn: [Mm-hmm

Don: (2 sec) Um..In the movie he never sees [the--

Lyn: [What about when pulls the drawer out with the watches n everything that's not in the book.

Don: No.

Lyn: But that was a good touch.]

Don: [Oh [yeah.

Lyn: [I liked that.

Don: He nev the he never sees th the name of the book...with F-

Lyn: [Yeah, I

Don: [Alexander is writing um-- Cause I thought it, uh

Lyn: [didn't like that. I didn't like that.

Don: because I thought it

Lyn: (2 sec) I thought it takes like from the core a the book.

Don: Yeah I [think it does too.

Lyn: [I mean that just strikes you [with that

Don: [I mean it just it you know he's his then his attack into F Alexander's home just becomes a lot mindless violence.

Lyn: /Yes/ exactly an it's not like..he doesn't seems to connect anything.

Don: Yeah. I mean F Alexander becomes just sort of another victim for him rather uh having any kind of special meaning.

Lyn: Mm-hmm

Don: You know he comes back in the end an he has special meaning because he you know it's he returns to the place but um

445 Lyn: He doesn't seem to foreshadow anything.
446 Don: No...No an I think that's where the movie loses out. I th the
447 more I read it the more I like th book and uh..probably because
448 the movie I think ends after it does after that twentieth chapter
449 / ?/...Uh I dunn I'm ambiv- very ambivalent about Alex
450 because I like h- I like what he does I don't like his /stuff/ but I
451 really just think his..control of the language and of uh his
452 control of the whole story is is fantastic.
453 Lyn: Well it is--
454 Don: [You know. But he's he's a /little bigot/ he's a rotten little
455 s.o.b. I think (Lyn laughs). Well I mean you know it's nobody's
456 gonna cheer for Alex I mean. Although we end up cheering for
457 him. We end up laughing about him.
458 Lyn: [I did.
459 Don: Well why is that?
460 Lyn: You have to respect him for the /scum/ that he is... You know?
461 I dunn I just he has character. Seems like you could find part of
462 him in you.. I mean he wanted to go /onto this thing/ to get
463 better but, he didn't wanna get better he wanted /out/.
464 Don: Yeah.
465 Lyn: [An I can understand that n you're like well I've probably done
466 that a million times with things.
467 Don: Yeah I mean we all look for the path of least resistance you know
468 the easy way out. Um yeah Alex has there's a certain know
469 Alex (2 sec) for whatever di uh destruction an an violent and I
470 guess negative qualities he has there's uh uh mean he takes a
471 real--
472 Lyn: [/???/ (simultaneous conference in the office is quite loud)
473 Don: He takes a real joy in what he does I mean really um (4 sec) You
474 know I mean you know that whatever thy thy hand shall do
475 God do so with all thy strength. Alex does that and it uh you
476 know I mean it's... We would look an say you know he's doin the
477 wrong thing but.. He does it with all of his strength and there's
478 something know he has a great force of will.
479 Lyn: Mm-hmm
480 Don: And I think boy that's somethin to be it's somethin t'be respected
481 if not liked, y'know what he does with it I think um
482 Lyn: It's kinda like can you blame somebody when they do something
483 wrong but they don't know they're don't know they're doin
484 it wrong?
485 Don: (3 sec) Yeah I mean he's I mean he's just..he's acting on uh
486 ya know he's acting on this on on with such forcefulness (2 sec)
487 I dunno y'know I mean there's something, well there's hesitation

488 about it um..n that's (2 sec) y'know.
489 Lyn: [He doesn't have a conscience at that
490 point.
491 Don: Yes /?/
492 Lyn: If he doesn't have a conscience can can you blame im can you be
493 really angry with im?
494 Don: (3 sec) No no ya really can't (5 sec) /Nobody/ really can't (3 sec)
495 blame Alex.

The talk moves on to the conventions of movies and movie endings.

520 Lyn: But in the movie when you go to the cinema an if everything
521 ends up happily ever after, things don't always work out, okay?
522 Don: Well no an an y'know n that's why I uh (2 sec) that's why I find
523 then sometin like "Pretty Woman" or "Officer and a Gentleman"
524 or you know this this
525 Lyn: /??/ Those those are different different stories though. Those
526 are love movies. (2 sec) This isn't a love story (little laugh)
527 Don: (3 sec) Yeah but I mean that that that there's a there's a there's a
528 certain..unrealistic and and and..and I--
529 Lyn: [But they are fairytales.
530 Don: They are they're fairy tales, um
531 Lyn: Why are they fairy tales? Cinderella (4 sec) (laughs)
532 Don: I'm sorry I'm just not big on Cinderella stories (Lyn laughs)I I
533 just I dunno I think I just have this darker vision of things / ? /
534 Lyn: [I love
535 Cinderella stories.

Don explains at this point in a lengthy turn how predictable "Cinderella" stories are and why he objects to them. Then he resumes the "conference" and asks Lyn if she has other papers to discuss.

For a total of 136 turns, Don and Lyn actually converse, sharing in the development and initiation of topics, agreeing and disagreeing, interrupting each other to elaborate on their partner's previous comment, talking over one another to follow through a thread and then returning to shared topics. Lyn's sudden shift from conference to conversation takes Don by surprise. But, like Mary, he accepts Lyn's offer of a different relationship. Between the two of them, they construct an analysis of the book and the movie, talking about lack of connections between scenes, reader and viewer response, foreshadowing, and control. They move then into an even larger context, to the topic introduced by Lyn—paradigmatic structure for

movies. Here, Lyn offers some disagreement with Don, but unlike disagreement in other conferences, because of the shared perspective and the inclusive positions they've adopted, it remains simple disagreement, not challenge. Talk is almost symmetrical during this segment, a highly atypical teaching situation but one in which Lyn demonstrated on her own terms what she knew and how she felt, and had the opportunity to place those responses and that knowledge in a context other than the usual classroom one. She constructed the opportunity to imagine a larger audience than her teacher.

Rick and Lyn, in conjunction with willing teachers, were able to shift the traditional student-teacher relationship. There is a real change in the tone and pattern of speech; transcribing these tapes, I immediately heard that shift, heard a new intensity. Rick is excited, and he shares his story with enthusiasm, while Mary laughs freely, gasping at some information and asking questions that show her involvement. Lyn and Don joust after Lyn's evaluation of the book. These teachers and students share information and ideas, and learning is taking place in ways that hold promise for a fundamental change in a power structure that has resisted that change. What would happen if students learned to challenge assumptions? To offer a conversational gambit? To answer questions with questions? To draw attention to power structures and challenge them?

What Students Want From Conferences: Envisioning a New Relationship

At my request, colleagues have asked their students to write about their best and worst conferences and to describe or define what a conference is or does or should be. Many of these conference descriptions indicate that students are aware of and resent the kind of control that so discouraged me as I analyzed the transcripts of my research conferences. They feel keenly the anger that accompanies being silenced, the frustration of being dominated and confused.

> In my [first-year composition] class last semester my teacher had conferences with everyone in the class. I remember thinking, "Great, just another half hour that I have to come in and spend with a person I don't want to talk to." But I realized that this conference could be valuable to me. My teacher wasn't going to talk the entire time; I would have a chance to voice

> my opinion also. I walked into her office with an open mind, ready to get something accomplished. But to my surprise, the teacher dominated the conference. When I finally had a chance to speak, she closed her mind. Completely unreasonable, my teacher would not budge an inch. She had completely closed her mind to the situation. Nothing new was accomplished, and I look at this conference as a failure.

Another student describes a conference that started off well but wound up being a frustrating experience.

> The teacher was very kind and she was giving me ideas, but then the paper started turning into her paper rather than mine. By the time the session was over I felt as if I had to return home and try and express my teacher's ideas in my paper to give what she wanted. In the end, my paper took forever to do, it was a mess, and I hated it.

There are two strands that run through the responses. One strand is affective: students are afraid, nervous, excited, or uncertain of themselves and want to talk about those feelings, want to talk about those feelings, want some reassurance. I've written about this in chapter five; here, I simply want to say that when students ask that teachers acknowledge their feelings, I am reminded of Giroux's assertion of the need for us to remember that students' "drives, emotions, and interests" provide momentum for learning itself" (107). The second strand indicates that students perceive conferences as goal-oriented: teachers and students meet in their institutional capacities to discuss a problem with a paper. Repeatedly, students write that they want "guidance," to be set on the "right track," they want "to accomplish" something, they want a writing problem "solved." They want the teacher to draw on his or her expertise in the field and apply it to the problem the student wants assistance with. Comments should be "clear" and "constructive," not just critical. "Conferences are a time for individuals (usually professor and student) to come together and rediscover original objectives. This often entails review of past work and discussion of a new or continued direction. Conferences help clear up questions and get everybody on the same page."

Students demand that teachers acknowledge their authority. What does the teacher know that can help the student? This is not the unambiguous request, "What will it take to get an A?" (One reason I think this question makes teachers cringe is that it baldly acknowledges what we so often try to pretend isn't so—that *we* have the

authority to set standards, that an "A" is what we say it is.) Rather, the student here articulates with a metaphor what runs through many responses: the student and teacher need to be on the same page, but not necessarily reading it the same way.

Just as it is students who disrupt the ordinary patterns of power and knowledge in the conferences I've studied, it is students who envision a new relationship with their teachers. One of the students above calls for mutual learning in the conference, for "rediscovery" of the original objectives. He is asking that objectives be excavated from all that has buried them over the semester; he is suggesting that reflection is part of discovery and is a necessary component of conferencing. Another student concludes his discussion of conferencing by describing a relationship between teacher and student that is mutually responsive, active, supportive, and symmetrical: "I think a conference is a place where both people learn about each other, their ideas and experiences, and relate to each other their ideas to help one another grow." The concept of the teacher learning from the student and using that learning in an even wider community is echoed in the description one woman provided of a conference she enjoyed with her systems analysis professor. She writes: "To me, conferences should be times when a teacher and student learn from each other; the teacher learns how he/she can help the student (possibly enabling the teacher to better understand how to help others) and the student should learn from the teacher (how to solve their particular problems)."

I learn from students when I forget that I am a teacher. I learn from them when the traditional hierarchies have been disrupted and suddenly the two of us have access to the same information, are involved together in the process of creating knowledge. One of the foundational tenets of critical pedagogy is that the teacher must also be a learner. It is difficult to learn when we are engaged not in dialogue with our students and the larger communities we all represent, but in a monologue delivered in a cocoon. The student who asked for comments that weren't all critical but constructive is asking for the language of possibility to be used when we meet and talk. Once we understand what is not effective, not "working" and why, how can we re-envision it? What are the possibilities for a paper? For a relationship? How can writing this paper, approaching this material, sharing my thoughts with other students and my family and the communities of which I am a part help to empower me or others?

How can I effect change? Students want conferences to live up to their possibilities. Their responses are full of the language of hope—and the angry language of smashed hopes.

Demystifying Conferences, Sharing Power

Both students and teachers agree that while successful conferences may involve teaching, they always involve learning of some sort, and in the best conferences, there is active, mutual learning. What I've seen in the study conferences is that passive learning is the norm and opportunities for active learning are rare, requiring the cooperation of both teacher and student. But creating those opportunities requires that both participants more fully understand conferencing as a genre of speech, something that has conventions and that those conventions can be tossed aside or clung to, depending upon what each person desires or has the knowledge and power to demand. We need to be trained in the genre as do our students. Most of these conferences were requested by the teacher, and while teachers conference with many different students, possibly gaining a greater repertoire of conferencing techniques (I say "possibly" because the conferences I've listened to don't indicate that the teacher individualizes conferencing to the extent that we would like to believe), students conference less frequently and with fewer teachers. Some students who responded to my questions about the nature of conferencing indicated that they had little or no experience to draw on. For such students, conferencing is a vague and abstract concept, but one they will perhaps learn more about—unfortunately sometimes from teachers with no training or critical reflection.

If we think about how we might teach our students about poetry—and how we've learned and continue to learn about poetry ourselves—we can begin to reconstruct our notions about writing conferences. What counts as a poem? When does a poem push the limits? Prose poems? Found poetry created from words seen in a subway station? Ten word poems? Is it a conference if we don't discuss a single word of text? How long or short can a conference be? Some of us learned that a poem is rhymed and has a distinctive shape on a page and are stunned to read prose poems and disconcerted to read poems that play with the language of a repair manual. When I asked colleagues for conference tapes, one sent a set of tapes that comprised one two-hour conference held over two days. The student and

teacher wound their way through topics that clearly connected to the text as well as many that were far more personal. He insisted that this was normal for him. Another gave me several conference tapes that included meetings with writing groups of three students, a typical practice for her. In her tapes, students sometimes held brief "side-conversations" as she spoke with just one student, then all four would speak about a single topic. Like prose poems and found poetry, these pushed against the edges of what I understood to be most common, and so I began my work with the one-to-one conferences. What is clear, though, is that as a genre, conferences—like poems—can come in many forms.

We need to consider not just structure, but purpose—why it is that we conference. If it is to "get to know" our students, to hear their experiences, is there a reason why we might want to hear them privately, rather than have them share those experiences with their classmates? If students share their experiences with each other, in class, won't they begin to build a community, to change each other's lives in subtle ways? What is the benefit of sharing only with me? And if I am encouraging critical reflection, if many voices can better make a student rethink or understand her experiences in new ways, why should my voice be the only one she hears or thinks "counts?" If I am going to be critical and reflective about my own practice, I have to ask myself: What do I want to know? Why do I want to know that? What do I want students to know about me? When would I tell them something privately? Do I forsee myself saying the same thing over and over with each student? If so, is our time better served by my telling them all at once, in class interview? How will I use what I learn from my students? Will I use that information to change resistance into submission, to draw students into an academic structure as easily as possible? Or do I want to know so that I can begin to learn what strengths, what values, what lives and constructions my students bring with them individually as a way to initially structure a class and develop community?

Rather than initial "get to know you" conferences, each of us constructs an introductory portfolio and shares it during the first week or so in class. We each select three items of importance to us and provide initially a brief written introduction to those pieces. We share them first in a small group, where the stories that give those items meaning are swapped, then select one of the three items to share with the whole class, again telling the story, this time in a way that has

been shaped by the telling a few minutes earlier, when we learned what most interested classmates, what information was needed or wanted. I read all the written introductions and respond personally, not institutionally—no grade. When I return the introductions and students comment about the lack of a grade, we can begin talking about power, about expectations, about active and passive learning.

I ask students to read the syllabus and to work in small groups to generate questions about the class and about me; I acknowledge that I am at the moment a focus of attention and curiousity and talk with them about why this is so. I also let them know that I am intensely curious about them, their experiences and beliefs and goals. In this way, we begin immediately exploring the traditional power structure of the class. We do a whole-class conference at that point. My openness in answering questions, my willingness to tell and listen to stories—not just lecture—help develop a relationship of trust. As I do so, my language shifts back and forth: I cannot speak of my father without my eastern working-poor dialect and without incorporating the kind of sly humor I admire in him. As I move between academic and home languages, I model for students a way of coexisting in these two worlds.

Students are acutely aware of the ways in which some questions elicit surface information and others delve more deeply, and after we have answered questions about each other, we talk about how questions are structured and how they work to change or support the usual teacher-student relationship. We talk about the ways each of us has shaped the conference, and move from there to talking about conferencing. Here, I ask them to describe their worst or best conferences and to tell me what conferences should do, what they should feel like. In small and large groups, we compare responses and begin to construct some goals for conferencing, to explore what is possible, what is desirable. We begin to see that there doesn't have to be one single, simple model for how that talk might be shaped.

As I worked through my research, I asked myself questions about the value of conferencing. I began to feel as if I was making an argument that conferencing is not nearly as important as we would like to believe and that perhaps we shouldn't conference. Nonetheless, I always had the "felt sense" that conferencing was important, was necessary. Critical educators are concerned with the use of "emancipatory authority," that is, the use of authority and power for social

change—the empowerment of oppressed groups, the end of exploitive practices, the elimination of systemic inequality. Conferences don't usually "just happen"—somebody requests or demands one. Given a choice, my guess is that students would prefer to schedule conferences only when they want them, which might be rare in non-empowering classrooms; teachers often require conferences because they think the student needs it whether the student thinks so or not. As reflective, critical teachers, we have to ask ourselves whether we will use our power to schedule conferences, and if so, why.

I schedule conferences initially for several reasons. In some ways, for me, it is part of pedagogical pluralism. I neither learn in just one way nor teach in one fashion, but am constantly adapting to my students, to the contexts we are creating together, and to changing goals. Further, critical practitioners like Giroux and McLaren point out the importance of the teacher in using power to help students learn to analyze their experiences, to place them in different social contexts, and to learn a discourse that allows for critique and possibility. While the opportunity and maybe even the temptation to misuse power in a conference may be enormous, the opportunity for transformation is also enormous. I have written earlier about the ways in which the conversational aspects of conferencing often encourage students to share personal experiences and teachers who see themselves as speaking partners are prompted to share as well. The intimacy of that setting, of that exchange, is transformative. We cannot go back easily to a traditional institutional relationship. I can also see the argument for requiring conferences in order to provide students with experience in a speech genre so closely connected to power, access to information, and the discourse of the community students are attempting to join or have been required to be a part of.

I can, however, understand not requiring students to participate in conferences, for the negotiation of authority and control is an integral part of learning. After a couple of conferences, I leave it up to the individual student to schedule conferences with me, unless I have a specific reason to speak with the student privately. But if conferences are seen as part of the whole experience of learning and students feel empowered and responsible, most continue to schedule conferences.

How do conferences "count" in my curriculum? Although at one time I ignored that issue, assuming that I only counted conferences

as part of participation, critical discourse analysis has forced me to rethink the ways in which I am evaluating my students. In the learning community my students and I envision, dividing a course grade into smaller units becomes more difficult—there is less emphasis on discrete skills. If my goal is to teach students to question their experiences and to restructure knowledge in ways that are connected to a democratic ethic, then I need to think carefully about the ways in which students can demonstrate their thinking and learning in a one-to-one situation. I need to be conscious of ways in which I construct talk which might not encourage that demonstration. Any system of evaluation rests on values, and should be established after discussion about what the various communities represented by the teacher and students find most important.

I also need to think carefully about how my students can evaluate me, can help me learn at the same time they're learning. When I last conferenced, I had just begun the process of asking students to share a partially guided evaluation of their conferences with me as a way of checking to make sure we were "on the same page" so to speak. I also wrote an evaluation for the student. The guiding questions included "What was the most helpful comment (if any) that I gave you? What did you enjoy most? Were there times when you were lost, confused, angry, frustrated or surprised, or particularly pleased? Please provide me with as much detail as you can about these moments. What can I do in the future to help construct a better conference? What can you do? Do we need to set up another conference?" I responded in a similar way to my students, and we exchanged these the next class meeting after the conference.

I think this kind of reflective and analytical practice is helpful in teaching students to be critical and hopeful. A conference provides a shared experience between teacher and student, a sliver of common knowledge. Collaborating to analyze and transform this experience, learning to use it to effect change, is an extension of critical pedagogy in the classroom.

Just as critical pedagogy insists upon exposing any hidden agenda in the classroom or elsewhere, there should be no hidden agenda for a conference. If I have asked a student to conference with me, I should tell him or her as clearly as I can why. What issues do I want to raise and why? What texts or experiences do I want to discuss? What can the student reasonably expect to happen when we meet? What should she or he bring to help us confer? Some of these suggestions

seem simple, even trivial. But I remember conferences with teachers where I worked myself into a frenzy of anxiety and self-doubt before I walked into the office because I didn't know what I'd done wrong, where I'd failed. I didn't bring papers, poems, textbooks, or some material with me that was necessary to the conference. In not doing so, I "failed" all over again—I wasn't prepared, I hadn't anticipated my teacher's needs, I wasn't a good student. Sharing an agenda in advance is part of showing your hand, giving up the power to surprise and control. It the beginning of a more equal relationship, one based on learning and not gatekeeping, on changing relations, not maintaining the status quo.

It seems to me that it's not only me who needs to rethink conferencing as a standard, ordinary, unquestioned practice, but the whole discipline of composition, which has been one of its most vociferous supporters. We have to examine what it is we want from conferencing and we have to explore the possibility that it often doesn't accomplish those things—it just doesn't work. So far, conferencing practice seems to have escaped the net of "accountability" that has caught up the rest of the academic world, and we continue with a practice that is cherished but unexamined. If we are critically reflective about the ways in which we are constructing and reproducing harmful concepts and structures, then we will be learners with our students. We will be modeling the ways in which our experiences matter, the ways in which we can use them to transform society. If a critical analysis of conferencing has shown that it is something less than we had hoped, that it fails in many ways to achieve what we wanted it to, then we can still go back to the hope while interrogating the practice.

Dana was fishing for help when she gathered up the courage to ask Eric how to be insightful. And each time we talk with each other about conferences, we are fishing in murky waters, hoping for answers. But when we fish with our words, we are fishing together, students and teachers, weaving a net, writing that long story.